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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 001392

SIPDIS

STATE FOR SA/INS

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SUBJECT: MALDIVES: ATMOSPHERE CALM BUT TENSE AMID FEARS
FOR DETAINEES' WELFARE

REF: COLOMBO 1337

Classified By: CDA JAMES F. ENTWISTLE. REASON: 1.5 (B,D).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Summary: The atmosphere in the Republic of Maldives remained calm but tense in the week following the August 12-13 demonstrations against the government in Male', the capital. Night-time curfews (from about 11:00 p.m. to 4:30 a.m.) remain in effect, but schools and businesses are open, and movement during non-curfew hours is not restricted. The Government of the Republic of Maldives (GORM) has assured the Embassy, via diplomatic note, that all detainees arrested in connection with the demonstrations will be treated humanely, but concern for their welfare persists. EU Missions in Colombo are sending a fact-finding delegation to the Maldives August 22-24, while the GORM is sending a special envoy to meet with the Sri Lankan Prime Minister and Foreign Minister in Colombo this weekend. With the demonstrations behind it, the GORM is clearly on damage control. Although official GORM statements are attempting to depict the demonstrators and detainees---who include at least eight Members of the Regular and Special Majlis--as "extremist" and "fundamentalist" elements in order to discredit them, so far we see little evidence to support such claims. End summary.

TROUBLE IN PARADISE

2. (SBU) The Maldivian capital of Male' remained calm but tense during the week following the August 12-13 demonstrations against the government (Reftel). A visiting Maldivian businessman told us that night-time curfews from 11:00 p.m. to 4:30 a.m. remain in effect, but that businesses, shops and schools are open and that movement during non-curfew hours is not restricted. Airports are open (our interlocutor had flown to Colombo from Male' just a few days after the demonstrations), and tourist resorts unaffected.

MALDIVIAN ENVOY TO VISIT SRI LANKA;
EUROPEANS OFF TO MALE

3. (C) Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar called in the Charge, and polchief August 19 to review the situation in Maldives. Kadirgamar said that Maldives looked to Sri Lanka as a "big brother" and numerous Maldivians had extensive contacts in Sri Lanka. He had heard from a number of Maldivians asking for some sort of GSL help in the wake of the recent unrest and arrests in Male,. He said he had been observing, both through Sri Lankan High Commission in Male' and via his own Maldivian contacts, the progress of Maldivian pro-democracy activism, but had so far seen no evidence of the radical or fundamental Islamic elements the Government of the Republic of Maldives (GORM) had hinted at.

4. (C) Kadirgamar said he had been planning to put out a GSL statement urging reconciliation and expressing hope that the political reform process would not be derailed by recent disturbances. He had just learned, however, that Maldivian President Gayoom was sending his Minister of Health to Colombo this weekend as a personal envoy to review the situation with the GSL. He and Prime Minister Rajapakse would meet with the Maldivian envoy (President Kumaratunga is leaving town today until the end of the month). The GSL will wait to put out its statement until after meeting with Gayoom,s envoy.

5. (C) Kadirgamar said he wanted to coordinate GSL efforts with the UK, India and the United States and asked Charge, for input. Charge, gave Kadirgamar a copy of the U.S. statement and stressed that our two primary concerns were the continuation of political reform and treatment of prisoners. Our view was that Gayoom had taken a hard look at his political system after the disturbances a year ago and implemented a serious reform effort. Many of his inner circle stood to lose in this process, however, and probably

were working to scuttle it. Kadirgamar said U.S. views parallel his and that he would provide a readout next week on his weekend meeting with the Maldivian envoy.

16. (C) Several European missions in Colombo have decided to send an EU fact-finding delegation to Male' August 22-24. We understand that most of the Europeans' meetings with the GORM will take place on August 23. We have asked for a read-out following the delegation's return to Colombo. The British High Commission in Colombo has told us that FCO has issued a statement on the Maldives similar to our own. A call from the British Deputy Prime Minister to the Maldivian president remains under consideration as well.

DETAINEES' WELFARE REMAINS A CONCERN

17. (C) On August 18 poloffs met with Maldivian businessman Mohamed Ismail Maniku, who had traveled to Colombo to seek legal counsel for his friend and former SAARC Secretary General Ibrahim Hussein Zaki, who, along with an estimated eight other MPs, remains in detention following the demonstrations. According to Maniku, Zaki has been allowed only one phone call and no visitors during his detention. Although Zaki's wife received no indication that her husband was being mistreated in prison when she spoke with him by telephone, Maniku said he believes his friend runs a grave risk of torture and mistreatment while in custody. He added that there had been unconfirmed reports that Dr. Mohamed Munavvar, another prominent detainee, had been "assaulted" in custody. To his knowledge, none of the detainees has yet been formally charged.

18. (C) Maniku expressed concern that the GORM's characterization of the demonstrations as a coup attempt might be a thinly veiled ploy by the government to justify adopting especially draconian and non-transparent measures against detainees and to undermine the credibility of the pro-democracy movement. (Note: At a press conference on August 17, Dr. Ahmed Shaheed, President Gayoom's Communications Director, charged that the demonstrators were attempting to overthrow the government. End note.) Moreover, since none of the detainees has yet been permitted access to legal counsel and since there is only a handful of lawyers in the country anyway--and almost no one willing to undertake such risky and controversial cases--prospects for a free and fair trial are dim, he said. (Complicating the situation, one of the Maldives' most prominent attorneys appears to be among the estimated 180 detainees.)

GORM EXPLANATIONS

19. (U) On August 18 the Embassy received a faxed diplomatic note from the Maldivian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ostensibly in direct response to the Department's August 16 statement. The note asserts that "the Government of Maldives' resolve to continue the process of political and constitutional reform remains unchanged . . . despite recent setbacks." The note blames a "fundamentalist" Muslim cleric for sparking the demonstrations, an event which unnamed "others who were behind the scene" used "to arouse more anti-government feelings among the public. . . . The events of 12th and 13th August clearly show that if any opportunity is given to these extremist elements, they would become extremely vicious and dangerous. While the Government is determined to continue with its reform agenda, it will take every possible measure to prevent these radical elements spreading their destructive propaganda in the country." The note goes on to report that the President has set up a special commission to ensure that all detainees are treated "properly" and reports the GORM's willingness to allow representatives of the National Human Rights Commission "or any other similar bodies" to visit the detainees. In conclusion, the note asserts, "all detainees will be treated humanely, fairly and in accordance with the Constitution of the Republic of Maldives and as per the international norms of human rights." The Embassy has not yet been able to verify whether members of the National Human Rights Commission (one of whom is among the detainees) or other similar organizations have been able to visit the detainees.

COMMENT

110. (C) The GORM has arrested nearly 200 people in the wake of the demonstrations, and we do not know most of them. Those that we do know, however--a former Attorney General; a former SAARC Secretary General; a member of the National Human Rights Commission; and a prominent local businessman--do not fit the "extremist" and "fundamentalist" tags the GORM has leveled against them. Such sensationalist name-calling seems an attempt to duck the politically

difficult pro-democracy reforms that we believe these demonstrations are really about and that the GORM has pledged to undertake. The reassuring tone of the MFA's dipnote notwithstanding, the GORM's kneejerk clampdown on the demonstrators does not bode well for progress on promised reforms. We will continue to press the GORM for evidence that it will uphold the commitments to continue the process of reform and to ensure international human rights standards.

ENTWISTLE